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FM AMEMBASSY CHISINAU  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7494  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS CHISINAU 000005

SENSITIVE

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STATE FOR EUR/UMB, DRL/AE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: GRINCH STEALS CHRISTMAS AGAIN IN MOLDOVA

Sensitive but Unclassified. Please Protect Accordingly.

REF: 07 Chisinau 1490

11. (SBU) Summary: Once again, the central government has interfered with Chisinau Christmas celebrations in an attempt to thwart Chisinau Mayor Dorin Chirtoaca and assert its control over public space in the capital. Like last year, the confrontation began with a wandering Christmas tree; this year, it escalated to taking away gifts from orphans. End summary.

12. (SBU) The 2007 confrontation began on December 9, when the Mayor put up a large Christmas tree on Chisinau's central square, only to see it removed on December 10 to a remote location behind the next square. In 2008, events began on December 15, when central government authorities "arrested" the 35-foot Chisinau mayoral tree at its point of origin, the village of Cojusna, about 12 miles northwest of Chisinau. According to a press release from Chirtoaca's office, traffic police requested a copy of the purchase contract for the tree (not applicable because the tree was purchased from a private household), the driver's identification documents and driving permit, and a permit from the State Ecological Inspectorate. Finding some of the documents "not in order," the police seized the tree.

13. (SBU) In contrast to 2007, when the City Hall tree was allowed to stand in front of City Hall, the 2008 tree remained under arrest at the Strasenii Forest Center (about 15 miles northwest of Chisinau), and was stolen on December 20 by unknown persons, according to press reports. Chisinau Mayor Dorin Chirtoaca's December 20 attempts to put up smaller trees at five locations in the city (including a space in front of City Hall) were stopped by police. Chirtoaca was able, however, to put up holiday lights over Chisinau's main boulevard on December 18. Chirtoaca had to settle for getting a tree set up in front of a boarding school for orphans 15 miles away in Strasenii.

14. (SBU) On December 23, a City Hall car carrying gifts for the orphans was stopped by police, who directed the driver to report to a police station in a Chisinau suburb. According to the Mayor's office, Chirtoaca had planned to distribute the gifts later in the day, but the gifts were confiscated and the driver fined on the grounds that he had no license to transport goods. Even after City Hall presented documents giving such permission, the police retained the gifts. PRO TV broadcasts showed that when Mayor Chirtoaca attempted to visit the school to offer holiday greetings on the same day, he was turned back at the entrance of the school by a Ministry of Interior (MOI) official. The official told Chirtoaca that an MOI delegation was visiting the school. Later, Chirtoaca was allowed in to talk with the children, though without presents.

Comment  
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15. (SBU) What appears to have become an annual holiday-season event in Chisinau featured farce, advance warning (Chirtoaca publicly

announced all his plans beforehand), specious and prejudicial legalisms, an implacable ruling-party hostility against the Liberal Party mayor, and a willingness to act ugly for political advantage. Countering the 2007 impression that the central government was merely favoring the later (January 7) date of Orthodox Christmas, in 2008 the GOM's Christmas tree was up, in the central square, by December 18. Thus it was on display in time for the December 25 date celebrated by the small minority of Orthodox Christians in Moldova who are subordinate to the Romanian Orthodox Church. When church dating and political opportunism were in conflict, the latter won. The willingness of the central government to confiscate gifts for orphans also demonstrates shamelessness and a lack of religious sensitivity. The well-publicized fact that Chirtoaca had to travel 15 miles to a neighboring town to install a Christmas tree epitomizes the limitations he faces in his own bailiwick.

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